

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY
INTERVIEW WITH KATIE COURIC ON NBC-TV PROGRAM, "TODAY"
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KATIE COURIC: On Close-up this morning: Iraq. As we've been reporting, thousands of Iraqi troops have moved towards Kuwait. In response, American troops are on their way to the region. Watching all this from the Pentagon is Secretary of Defense William Perry.

Mr. Secretary, good morning.

SEC. PERRY: Good morning, Katie.

MS. COURIC: On Sunday, U.S. officials estimated the Iraqis had something like 60 (thousand) to 80,000 troops near the Kuwait border. Has that changed overnight?

SEC. PERRY: It figures at the higher end of that range instead of the lower end, but not all of them at the border yet. The 80,000 includes an estimate of the number of troops that are on their way to the border now.

MS. COURIC: In fact, the Washington Post this morning reports that senior U.S. officials believe an entire additional division of the so-called elite Republican Guard troops is headed for the border. Can you confirm that for us this morning?

SEC. PERRY: We believe that there are two Republican Guard divisions either already at the border or nearly there. And a third one, which is in the northern part of the country, is on the move now and we expect it will be going to the border as well. It's if that third one goes to the border where you get the higher end of the range of figures.

MS. COURIC: I understand. There's been some pretty tough language coming from U.S. officials over the weekend. Does this mean that Saddam isn't getting the message?

SEC. PERRY: We are certainly transmitting the message loud and clear. I hope he is getting it by now.

MS. COURIC: Do the troops near the border appear poised for an invasion? What can you tell us about their posture?

SEC. PERRY: Well, they're still moving in, Katie, so it's hard to come to any firm conclusion. But we do see units that are actually very close to the

border, and in a sense artillery pieces, for example, pointed at the border.

MS. COURIC: What do you believe, Secretary Perry, Saddam Hussein is up to?

SEC. PERRY: It's -- you're really asking me to do something that I don't know that anybody can do well, which is forecast what's in his mind. What he has done so far makes no sense at all to me. But if he continues in the direction he's going, it looks like the same buildup, in many ways almost an identical buildup, to what he did when he invaded Kuwait before. Therefore, we dare not assume anything other than that he is preparing for another invasion, and our preparedness needs to reflect that.

MS. COURIC: In comments on Sunday, Mr. Secretary, you yourself warned that the U.S. will not be pinned down forever waiting out Saddam Hussein's next move. And, in fact, last night U.N. Ambassador Madeleine Albright said that -- discussed what level of instability might prompt some kind of U.S. action. Is it possible that there might be air strikes on Baghdad, on other targets, even if these Iraqi forces do not invade Kuwait?

SEC. PERRY: I don't want to speculate on what military actions we might take. But I have to say we take this action very seriously. We consider it provocative, particularly in light of the history of what he has done in the past. And we do not believe that we can accept it.

MS. COURIC: So you're not ruling that kind of action out.

SEC. PERRY: I would not rule it either in or out.

MS. COURIC: Yesterday Ross Perot said that President Clinton had other reasons for sending troops to Iraq. Here's a clip of what he said. Let's listen.

ROSS PEROT: (From videotape.) You don't have to make a giant event out of this. This whole thing is designed -- what's about to happen? We're about to have an election, right? This is the old game. The first war didn't get him a bump in the polls. Now let's try a second one.

MS. COURIC: What's your reaction to Mr. Perot's assertion that this is politically motivated, that the administration knew about this buildup earlier but didn't let the American people know?

SEC. PERRY: Well, my personal reaction to the statement is that it's outrageous. In terms of the factual data, the very first day that I heard about this buildup we announced it and we also began taking preparations. We began the deployment of

forces. It's just to me inexplicable that Ross Perot would equate actions which Saddam Hussein is taking with actions that we're taking. It just doesn't make any sense at all.

MS. COURIC: Mr. Perry, the number of U.S. troops being sent or assigned to Iraq to deal with this crisis has varied from 36,000 to 54,000. Can you give us any sort of understanding about how big this military buildup will eventually be?

SEC. PERRY: Yeah, the different numbers that are being reported, Katie, reflect different conditions and different times and whether we're talking about ground combat forces or total ground forces. Let me give you a few facts, though, to put it in perspective. There are 28,000 ground combat troops either in Kuwait or have been committed to go to Kuwait. That includes 18,000 from a Marine expeditionary force, 2,000 from a Marine amphibious ready group already there, and another 8,000 from the 24th infantry division.

Some of the figures included all 16,000 from the 24th infantry division, but we've only committed 8,000 of those so far. And that adds up to the 28,000. In addition to that, we have air forces and supply forces on the ground in both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

MS. COURIC: Okay, I understand. In closing, I know that you were in Port-au-Prince over the weekend meeting with General Cedras. He will step down later today. Did you get any guarantees from the general that he would, in fact, leave the country?

SEC. PERRY: I expect that he will step down from office today and that he will leave the country a day or two after that, yes.

MS. COURIC: What makes you say that, Secretary Perry?

SEC. PERRY: He indicated when he talked with me that he did agree that he would leave the country shortly after he stepped down from office.

MS. COURIC: Will he go to Spain? Is that your understanding?

SEC. PERRY: No, I do not believe he'll go to Spain.

MS. COURIC: Do you know where he will go?

SEC. PERRY: I don't want to speculate on that. I think it's up to him to announce that.

MS. COURIC: All right, Secretary of Defense William Perry. Mr. Secretary, thanks so much for talking with us this morning.

SEC. PERRY: Thank you, Katie.